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The Boom of the 1880s In Southern California

by Glenn Dumke

CALIFORNIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN a popular place to live. It was even popular with native Americans. At one time there were almost as many Indians in California and as many language dialects as there were in all the rest of continental United States. So it is understandable that it took no more than some minor encouragements to bring more and more people to the Golden State.

However, the encouragements that started the great land boom of the 1880s were not minor. The gold rush created an active market for the "cattle on a thousand hills" which for a time were southern California's chief product. The travelers came and were impressed. They wrote books in those days. You didn't have to be under indictment or a child criticizing a famous parent to write a bestseller. People became interested in the West. There was agricultural growth. More and more attention was paid to the balmy climate, the semi-tropical crops. People in the late 1870s and early 1880s were beginning to be aware of southern California. All it needed was a spark to set off the explosion.

That spark was provided when the railroads came to southern California. The Big Four, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, and Leland Stanford who had built the Central Pacific Railroad and linked the west coast with the east, in 1865 incorporated the Southern Pacific Railroad for the purpose of tapping the increasingly important southern part of the state. The federal government, paradoxically supporting free enterprise with vast grants of government land, subsidized the Southern Pacific's growth and enabled it to not only extend itself to southern California but then to build eastward to El Paso. For a time it seemed that the Southern Pacific's southern California monopoly was complete, but in the mid-1880s the Santa Fe Railroad built persistently westward and in a complicated series of deals involving purchase of the Mojave-Needles section of the S.P. and acquisition of two local

lines, the Santa Fe suddenly found itself in a position to compete with the Big Four.

Normal rates from the Mississippi Valley to southern California fluctuated in the neighborhood of \$125. By 1885 they were down to \$100, and when the Santa Fe drove its golden spike at Cajon Pass on November 9, 1885, they immediately dropped to \$95. There was thus a precedent of cutthroat competition, but the battle rose to sudden fury the following March. On the 5th of that month the Los Angeles *Times* reported:

Still cutting

The Railroads Get the knife in a Little Further San Francisco, Mar. 4. All overland roads this morning made open rates on limited tickets to eastern points as follows: Boston, \$47; New York, \$45; Chicago, \$32.

A Second Cut in Fares

Prices of limited tickets were cut for the second time today to the following figures; Chicago \$25; New York, \$40; Boston, \$42.

The climax came on March 6 when both the S.P. and the Santa Fe settled down to a finish fight over the fares between Kansas City and Los Angeles. In the morning the S.P. met the Santa Fe at \$12. The latter then dropped to \$10, and the S.P. followed suit. The Santa Fe cut again to \$8 and was met. Then the S.P., through some apparent misunderstanding, underbid itself, cutting to \$6, then \$4. Finally, shortly after noon, the S.P. announced a rate of *one dollar*. Santa Fe officials claimed they sold no tickets for less than \$8, but intentionally set a trap into which the S.P. neatly fell. These ridiculous levels did not persist long, and on March 10 it cost \$10 to travel to Chicago or St. Louis, and \$23 to go to New York. For approximately a year, however, fares remained below \$25 to Missouri River points and did not soon regain their former heights.

Rate cuts were by means of rebates at destination; that is, the passenger would receive the benefits of any cuts which were made during the journey. The railroads lost heavily on local traffic; passengers going to nearby points could buy transcontinental tickets at bargain prices and drop off at their respective destinations. Freight rates also went down.

"The result of this war," says Joseph Netz, one of the historians of the boom, "was to precipitate such a flow of tentative migration, such an avalanche rushing madly to Southern California as I

believe has had no parallel.”¹ Train service had to be doubled, and the population of Los Angeles was increased 100 percent when the S.P. arrived, and 500 percent with the arrival of the Santa Fe.

There were other inducements. Emigrant cars, with primitive sleeping and cooking accommodations, were offered for poor settlers, who were given a week’s free lodging in “emigrant houses” so they could stop off and earn enough to continue their journey. “Land-seeker’s tickets” applied railroad fares to purchase of railroad land. But the *piece de resistance* was the organized excursion, started by the Santa Fe in 1886. These entered California in early 1887 at the rate of three to five a day.

People were coming by the hundreds and thousands. The boom was beginning.

There was already solid agricultural development in southern California to impress the newcomers. As the cattle industry waned, crops were planted. The foremost industry of southern California as the boom started was the production of wine grapes. Production rose from 1,300,000 gallons in 1875 to 14,000,000 gallons in 1889, and in the latter year there were 150,000 acres devoted to vineyards and 120,000,000 vines bearing. But citrus growing rapidly overtook wine production. It had a slow start. As late as 1875 one observer said, “Nothing worthy of the name of orange could be seen in California. Thick-skinned, sour, pithy, and dry, it was an insult to the noblest of fruit to call the California product by that name... The lemons, great overgrown things, with skin half an inch thick over a dry and spongy interior, were more worthy of pity than contempt.”² But in 1873 the Department of Agriculture in Washington sent two seedlings of the navel orange to Mrs. L.C. Tibbetts of Riverside, and by 1889 more than 12,000 acres were devoted to citrus culture.

There were some unprofitable fads. William Workman, an early citizen of Los Angeles, tried cotton culture during the 1860s and, although the crop was good, its market was limited. It took some years for cotton to become California’s leading crop. Sericulture was also given a brief but hopeful trial, encouraged by a state subsidy of \$250 for every planting of 5,000 two-year-old mulberry trees. This also failed.

But agriculture, stimulated by fertile soil and balmy climate, produced increasing prosperity. There was a solid foundation, not

overlarge but growing, of economic development which underlay the boom.

However, neither railroad rate wars nor agriculture development could bring people suddenly in large numbers without the stimulus of advertising a peculiarly American phenomenon. Today, bombarded as we are 24 hours a day by noisy TV commercials, the advertising of the 1880s is as strange as the language of a foreign land. If you want some quiet amusement, look at the newspaper ads of the past century, or read the travelers' accounts.

Advertising in the '70s and '80s concentrated on seven topics.

One was climate. One visitor said enthusiastically: "This is Paradise. And the climate? Perpetual summer (but daily rising in price)..."³ Another visitor burred, "The architecture of this region will remind you that you are in a land where it is never very cold. The dwelling is a secondary matter here, and it results that many people are satisfied to live in very small and slight houses."⁴ Looking at the 6,000-7,000-square-foot dwellings now being built all over the California hills, one perceives that there has been a change in this attitude.

Another selling point was persuading easterners that California was no longer frontier territory. "The whole number of persons in the whole southern half of the State (where thousands sleep all summer on the open ground) injured by snakes and poisonous reptiles, animals, etc. in the last ten years is not equal to the number killed by lightning alone in one year in one county in many Eastern states." Earthquakes were not yet a widespread concern.

The admittedly sound agricultural base gave rise to extravagant claims. One writer exulted that 10 or even 5 acres were "a comfortable property...Half an acre in lemons is sufficient for the support of a family..."⁶ And another vigorous booster claimed that vine growth was so rapid that melons were bumped along and bruised on the ground. "If you want to pick a melon in this country, you have to get on horseback."⁷

Southern California was also touted as an economical place to live. One visitor said that living expenses before the boom were less by a third than in any eastern state, and another said that California was "the cheapest country in the U.S. to live in."⁸ These items must create some nostalgia among those of us who note land prices in the hills surrounding this valley, and view the million-dol-

lar condominiums on Wilshire Boulevard, and the \$1,000 a month rents now being charged for relatively modest quarters.

The area was also deemed to be a very healthy place to reside. "The purity of the air of Los Angeles is remarkable," said one observer. "Vegetation dries up before it dies, and hardly ever seems to decay. Meat suspended in the sun dries up but never rots. The air, when inhaled, gives to the individual a stimulus and vital force which only an atmosphere so pure can ever communicate."⁹ This was obviously before they had heard of smog.

One characteristic that has not completely vanished with the times was picturesqueness. The Spanish and Mexican periods had given California a romantic aura. Los Angeles even in those early days was defined as "cosmopolitan," and said to be "the product of one era of barbarism, two or three kinds of civilizations, and an interregnum."¹⁰

Finally, the underlying reason for the boom was not neglected. Charles Dudley Warner said, "It has been a subject of regret ever since that I did not buy Southern California when I was there last March, and sell it out the same month. I should have made enough to pay my railway fare back...and had money left to negotiate for one of the little states on the Atlantic Coast."¹¹

But travelers' accounts were not the only means advertising California. The railroads hired agents who wrote, lectured, and bragged about California in many different ways. The Southern Pacific land agent in San Francisco, Jerome Madden, was an example.

However, the most interesting type of advertising occurred in newspapers. The dramatic and pictorial impact of today was replaced by snob appeal and literary allusions. Real estate agents unfortunately resorted to verse:

Go wing thy flight from star to star
From world to luminous world as far
As the universe spreads its flaming wall.
Take all the pleasures of all the spheres,
And multiply each through endless years,
All winter at Vernon is worth them all.¹²

State associations also flourished. Perhaps some of you recall the popularity of the "state picnics" at Sycamore Grove and Bixby Park in Long Beach. When my family first moved to California,

annual attendance at the Wisconsin picnic in Sycamore Grove was a must. People from Illinois also formed an organization with 200 charter members. Its opening resolution ran as follows:

WHEREAS, We the members of the Illinois Association, having endured the tortures inseparably connected with life in a region of ice and snow, and having fled from our beloved State to this favored land, therefore be it

RESOLVED, That in this grand country we have the tallest mountains, the biggest trees, the crookedest railroads, the driest rivers, the loveliest flowers, the smoothest ocean, the finest fruits, the mildest lives, the softest breezes, the purest air, the heaviest pumpkins, the best schools, the most numerous stars, the most bashful real estate agents, the brightest skies, and the most genial sunshine to be found anywhere else in North America...

RESOLVED, That we heartily welcome other refugees from Illinois, and will do all in our power to make them realize that they are sojourning in a "City of the Angels" where their hearts will be irrigated by living waters flowing from the perennial fountains of health, happiness, and longevity.

All of which is respectively submitted in faith, hope and climate.¹³

Now that we have described the larger causes of the boom, let us look at the boom itself.

Los Angeles was, of course, a natural center of the flurry. It was the true focus of the boom. Urban capital financed the boom towns of the countryside, city realtors originated the most picturesque promotion schemes, the biggest auction sales were held within the city limits, and most buyers, even of country property, boarded excursion trains at a Los Angeles station.

During 1886-1888 there were filed in Los Angeles County alone some 1,770 tract maps, subdivisions, and replats. Mayor William Workman had purchased Boyle Heights land in 1867 for \$5 and \$10 an acre; he now sold it for \$200 an acre. One man purchased 32 acres at the corner of Vernon and Central avenues in 1883 for \$12,000 and sold them two years later at a loss. The same property brought \$40,000 in 1887. Twenty-five acres on 7th near Figueroa were unsuccessfully offered in 1886 at \$11,000; the next year they brought \$80,000. Land at 6th and Main, quoted at \$20 per front foot in 1883,

sold for \$800 per front foot in 1887. Even in those days there were predictions that Los Angeles would be expanding toward the west, although Boyle Heights was still a desirable place to live.

The year 1887 was the spectacular peak of boom excitement for all of southern California. When 1886 saw an influx of thousands of tourists and immigrants, promoters felt justified in predicting prosperity ahead. But the spring of the next year brought with it, not a recurrence of mere thousands, but the arrival of tens of thousands, who crowded the trains to overflowing and loudly demanded a place to stay and spend their money. The population of Los Angeles was estimated to have increased from 11,000 to 80,000 during boom years, and most of the increment came in 1887. Inhibitions and conservatism vanished. The gold was there for the taking, and aggressive noisiness carried the day.

Optimism was unquenchable. "Never again," said one editorial writer, "will real estate at points eligible for business purposes or for pleasurable occupation be as low at sometimes it has been on the market." And another exclaimed euphorically, "To call it a craze or a bubble is the veriest nonsense."¹⁴ Transfers in 1887 were recorded at the rate of 30 to 70 daily, involving sums ranging from \$100,000 to \$800,000. Monthly sales fluctuated in the neighborhood of \$5 million from January to March, but in April rose to \$7,174,908, and they continued to rise. And remember, these were not 1987 dollars. In those days this was real money.

Boom towns surrounding Los Angeles and elsewhere in southern California were numerous. Inglewood, co-founded by a wealthy Canadian named Daniel Freeman, The Palms, La Ballona (the present Playa del Rey), Redondo Beach, and Long Beach itself, promoted actively by an Englishman named William Erwin Willmore, were also results of the boom along the ocean shore. George Shatto bought Catalina Island from the Lick estate in 1887 for \$200,000, sold 200 lots at auctions, and built a hotel. Santa Monica was already in existence, but prospered from the boom as did Los Angeles.

San Gabriel Valley was probably the suburban area struck hardest by the boom, and boom towns proliferated. Highland Park, Garvanza, Lincoln Park, South Pasadena, Lamanda Park, Huntington, Sierra Madre, Arcadia, Monrovia, Duarte, Azusa, San Dimas, Lordsburg, Claremont, Ontario, Cucamonga, Etiwanda and, although it started just prior to the boom, Alhambra. Azusa caused

though it started just prior to the boom, Alhambra. Azusa caused much excitement. The town was publicized to such an extent that buyers stood in line all night before the sale opened (note Orange County today). The person who held second place in line refused an offer of \$1,000 to give it up, and the eager investor who held fifth place reluctantly sold his location for \$500.

The place in the San Gabriel Valley hit hardest by the boom, in fact second only to Los Angeles, was Pasadena. It had been founded in 1873 when a group of Indianans led by Dr. Thomas Balch Elliott formed the California Colony of Indiana for the purpose of locating a suitable area in California and settling thereon. A committee of investigation led by David M. Berry went to explore, and settled on the location. Berry then formed the San Gabriel Orange Grove Association which in 1873 founded Pasadena. When the Santa Fe arrived, the boom started, the Raymond Hotel was built in 1886, and Pasadena was incorporated as a city in that year. The old Green Hotel in Pasadena was also a boom product. An indirect result of the boom was the arrival of Professor Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, who built an observatory and the Mount Lowe Railway on the adjacent range.

In the Santa Ana Valley the boom operated largely on established communities. Of all the towns in the region which were laid out during the period, Fullerton is the only one which justified its promoters' hopes, although some tracts which died for several decades, are now flourishing. The greatest effect of the boom on this area was the creation of a county, now Orange County. The project started when an interesting citizen of Anaheim, a Major Max Strobel, described as a "soldier of fortune and a Machiavellian in politics...always on the losing side" promoted the idea of county separation.¹⁵ The bill passed in 1889 with the encouragement of James McFadden, developer of Newport Beach, and William Spurgeon, founder of Santa Ana. The bill passed because of Los Angeles' penuriousness in refusing to finance an opposing lobby and San Francisco's glee at reducing the size of Los Angeles County.

In the San Bernardino region, Corona (then known as South Riverside), Redlands, Perris, and Hemet owed their early growth and in some cases, their existence, to the boom. As in the Santa Ana region, a county was created, Riverside, and although the bill was not signed until 1893, the boom was basically responsible.

In the San Diego region, promoters had been active for years before the boom. Alonzo Erastus Horton, a San Francisco furniture dealer, bought 900 acres of Old Town for 26 cents per acre in the '60s, and started some activity which was increased when Frank and Nathan Kimball of National City helped to bring a railroad, the California Southern, to San Diego. The '80s brought more people and more excitement. Prices rose and enthusiasm followed suit. Once during the flurry the population was said to have reached 50,000 and a realty firm stated, "In fact, we may say that San Diego has a population of 150,000 people, only they are not all here yet."¹⁶

By all odds the outstanding boom project in San Diego was Coronado, developed by a man named Elisha S. Babcock. He arrived in 1884, obtained some Illinois capital, organized a syndicate, bought 7,000 acres of empty brush-covered land for \$110,000 and started an advertising campaign which reached nationwide. More than \$2,000,000 in lot sales were racked up by the boom's end, and the most spectacular result was the impressive Hotel Coronado, still a beautiful if inflammable landmark of the region. Chula Vista, Encinitas, and La Jolla were other results of the 1880s near San Diego. The area also contributed its bit to boomtime advertising verse:

The shades of night were falling fast
When up through San Diego passed
One hundred men whose shrewd advice
Free given, without cost or price
was "Buy La Mesa! Buy La Mesa!"¹⁷

The Santa Barbara region was stimulated by the building of a Southern Pacific Railroad coast line northward from Los Angeles, starting in 1886. The city of Santa Barbara experienced considerable excitement and increased land sales, but the boom in this area was never as active or vigorous as it was farther south. Summerland, Carpinteria, Los Alamos, Los Olivos, Fillmore, Saticoy, and Goleta were townsites started by the boom, but most of the activity here was in underdeveloped ranch land.

In the Pomona area irrigation facilities begun by George and William Benjamin Chaffey were the major stimulus in the '80s. Etiwanda, Ontario, Upland, Claremont, Cucamonga, and Chino were boom products, as was Whittier, platted by a midwestern Quaker,

Acquilla H. Pickering. Pomona, although not started by the boom, was revived by it and really owes its survival and present importance to the excitement of the '80s.

Now we come to the San Fernando Valley, a major subject of our interest this evening. Glendale was a boom town. The San Rafael Rancho had been lost by its original grantees, the Verdugo family, through a sheriff's sale in 1869, and was purchased by Alfred B. Chapman, who, it might be remarked to his credit, reserved 200 acres for the benefit of Verdugo heirs. Chapman, Andrew Glassell, Ozro W. Childs, and Cameron E. Thom were the founders of Glendale, as was Moses L. Wicks, a prominent Los Angeles attorney who identified himself with many boom projects. The first plat of Glendale was filed in March of 1887. Burbank was laid out in April of the same year on lands of the Providencia Rancho. The town was first called Providencia, and early advertisements stressed the fact that it was on the main Southern Pacific line and six passenger trains passed through daily. The ads carefully omitted any mention of whether or not the trains stopped. La Canada and La Crescenta also were boom products.

Much of the San Fernando Valley had been owned by Pio Pico, who was bought out in 1869 by the San Fernando Farm Homestead Association. This group had purchased 60,000 acres in the southern half of the valley for \$115,000. San Francisco businessmen were back of the organization, including two Isaacs, Isaac Lankershim and Isaac Newton Van Nuys. The Association raised sheep and grain and was bought out in 1880 by the Los Angeles Farm and Milling Company. Lankershim later organized, in 1888, the Lankershim Ranch Land and Water Company and bought 12,000 acres in the eastern end of the valley from the Milling Company. He laid out small farm sites and charged from \$5 to \$55 per acre. The town of Toluca, later renamed Lankershim, and finally christened North Hollywood, was a major result.

The northern half of the valley was never under the control of the Farm Homestead Association but instead was acquired by Senator Charles Maclay of Santa Clara and his partner, George K. Porter, a San Francisco shoe manufacturer. They bought 56,000 acres of valley land lying between the present communities of Chatsworth and Sun Valley. Benjamin F. Porter, George's cousin, bought into the partnership, and the town of San Fernando was

platted by Maclay in 1874. Strongly encouraged by the Southern Pacific, which hoped to get rid of some of its land nearby, San Fernando, despite this help, had a slow beginning. Dissatisfied, Maclay founded the town of Pacoima, but this also had a slow start. The area to the west of the mission came under the control of two development companies: the Porter Land and Water Company acquired most of the land southwest of San Fernando, and the other, the San Fernando Valley Improvement Company, bought from Benjamin Porter the site of Chatsworth Park and platted it in 1888.

The man for whom this lecture series is named, William Paul Whitsett, was not a participant in the Boom of the '80s, but he certainly utilized sales methods proved effective in the '80s in his masterful development of sections of the San Fernando Valley. He came to California in 1905, it was said, for "reasons of health," but considering the leadership role and incessant activity into which he immediately plunged, his health problems could not have been all that bad. He was the founder of the city of Van Nuys.

His first activity was the development of a tract near Huntington Park, called Walnut Lawn, but he was diverted to the San Fernando Valley by a group of leading citizens, including General Harrison Gray Otis, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*. (He was the man who had a cannon mounted on the hood of his car to indicate his hostility to labor unions!) Others of Whitsett's colleagues were General M.H. Sherman and Harry Chandler. Whitsett bought for \$30,000 cash (full price \$176,000) a one-half interest in a mile-square development, which he christened, at the suggestion of Harry Chandler, Van Nuys.

He held a grand opening on February 22, 1911, with a Spanish barbecue, coffee in tin cups, and an auctioneer right out of the 1887 boom—Col. Tom Fitch. He sold 50-foot lots on Van Nuys Boulevard for \$1,000, and offered groups of lots a few blocks away for less than \$300. He sold 18,700 acres in eighteen months, more than 1,000 acres a month. He was a skillful salesman—it was reported that he had \$250,000 in sales the first day. Van Nuys was called "The birth of a town in a barley field." Whitsett tagged all incoming luggage on trains entering Los Angeles with metal-bound tags inviting the passenger to enjoy free transportation to San Fernando Valley. The passenger could turn in his tag at Whitsett's Los Angeles office and

get a place in a motor caravan which took him or her over Cahuenga Pass to Van Nuys. His slogan was "Van Nuys the town that was started right."

Whitsett was dedicated to land ownership and agriculture as well as the welfare of his neighbors. He established "garden communities" during the depression so that impoverished residents could be self-sustaining. He was given credit for starting the poultry business in the San Fernando Valley, and his skill and interest in agriculture inspired Mayor George Cryer to appoint him a Commissioner of the Los Angeles Water and Power Board, and a later mayor named him Los Angeles representative on the board of the Metropolitan Water District. He was subsequently named Chairman of the Board.

Whitsett was unquestionably one of the most constructive citizens of southern California, and this lecture series appropriately honors him.

To conclude our story of the boom of the '80s we must mention two phenomena basic to an understanding of the flurry. One was the creation of "ghost towns," communities begun with noisy enthusiasm and unquenchable optimism, but which, like Bodie and Panamint, ceased to fulfill their founders' dreams. Of the more than one hundred towns platted from 1884 to 1888 in Los Angeles County alone, sixty-two no longer exist except as stunted country corners, farm acreage, suburbs, or, in some cases, recently revived areas of subdivision and suburban development. Hyde Park, New Vernon, Arlington Heights, Walteria, Clearwater, Cahuenga, Waterloo, Raymond, Ramona, Savannah, Huntington, Alosta, Rockdale, Minneapolis, Ivanhoe (and street names in the vicinity still recall that literary background), Dundee, Monte Vista, Hesperia, Palomares, McPherson, Fairview, and Rincon were examples in the county and elsewhere.

The classic example of ghost town was Gladstone, near Azusa. It was introduced to an eager public by a half-page newspaper advertisement which contained merely one striking word:

GLADSTONE

This was followed by the booms largest and wordiest realty advertisements. Henry H. Boyce paid \$372,000 for the land, consisting of some 525 acres. Contemporaries thought this too high a

price, but Boyce was one of the owners of the Los Angeles *Tribune*, and was able to provide impressive publicity. There was good reason for the town's failure. It lacked a railroad connection, but its promoters ignored this problem. They pompously announced on April 15, 1887, in the *Tribune*: "The Rt. Honorable William Ewart Gladstone, the Premier Statesman of the World, will be presented with the title deeds to a lot in the new town of Gladstone, In the Heart of the Azusa. Other people can buy them of Frank McCoye, No. 23 North Spring Street." Gladstone was the epitome of the excursion-promoted town. At one sale four loaded railway cars, each with white canvas signs lettered in red and black, GLADSTONE, left Los Angeles for Azusa, where the train made a brief stop. Lunch was served at the tract and Colonel Boyce mounted a dry-goods box and explained the terms of sale. Another colonel, named Weller, was auctioneer, and a man with the suggestive name of Welsher obtained first choice of two lots for his \$50 bid. "So eager were the purchasers," ran the *Tribune's* version of the sale, "that 150 of them missed the train to this city."¹⁸ Litigation which clouded title to the land helped to bring about Gladstone's demise, and it joined the ranks of ghost towns early in the game.

In the San Gabriel Valley the town of Chicago Park, featuring 25-foot lots, was platted on the San Francisquito Ranch lands. Streets were named State and Dearborn, recalling the promoter's affinity for the Windy City. But the most remarkable feature of Chicago Park was that it was platted squarely in the bed of the San Gabriel River. Critics claimed that posters showing steamers chugging up the rippling waters of the San Gabriel to dock at Chicago Park were used to advertise the town. I could not locate any of these, but there were reports of them so it is probable that they really existed.

Two other ghost towns deserve mention Border City and Manchester, the brain-children of a promoter named Simon Hamburg. Hamburg carefully limited his sales to customers so far away they could not visit the townsites for the very good reason that the two town plats clung precariously to waterless desert hillsides. Guinn, one of the historians of the boom, said Border City "was most easily accessible by means of balloon, and was as secure from hostile invasion as the home of the cliff dwellers. Its principal resource...was view—a view of the Mojave Desert....Manchester

was a city of greater resources than Border City. Being located higher up on the mountain, it had a more extended view of the desert.”¹⁹

And a sample of one of the ghost town ads ran as follows:

NOTICE

In putting the Waterloo Tract upon the
market, the owners have decided:
To use a little printer's ink and a great
deal of cement sidewalk
A few locals, but many shade trees
A brass band only in the distance, but
water very near and in front of each lot.
Auctioneer? Not any! And our
GRAND FREE LUNCH
is composed mainly of price that the most
chronic dyspeptic can easily digest.²⁰

The boom attracted two kinds of people—one type consisted of solid, God-fearing respectable citizens who played a major role in developing southern California. Whitsett is an outstanding example, but there were many others, Jonathan Slauson, Moses Wicks, George Chaffey, Alfred Chapman, William Workman, Abbott Kinney, David M. Berry, Elisha Babcock, were all examples of good citizens who helped to build up the country. These were clearly in the majority, but any boom period whether the California gold rush, the Klondike, the opening of Oklahoma, or the southern California land boom inevitably attracts undesirables. Many of these were promoters who had been schooled in the Midwest—Kansas had been called a hotbed of land speculation based on railway land sales and homesteading. These experienced sharpers came to California well trained in shady methods. They were nicknamed “Escrow Indians,” and Guinn states that they were

fellows who had left their consciences (that is, if they had any to leave) on the other side of the Rockies. These professionals had learned the tricks of their trade in the boom cities of the west when that great wave of immigration which began moving after the close of the (Civil) war was sweeping westward from the Mississippi River to the shores of the Pacific. These came here, not to build up the country, but to make money, honestly if they could not make it any other way. It is needless to say they made it the other way.²¹

Their confident attitude, their suave talk, and their ingratiating manners made otherwise intelligent people gullible. The *Times* classified the newcomers as “dudes, loafers, paupers, those who expect to astonish the natives, those who are afraid to pull off their coats, cheap politicians, business crubs, impecunious clerks, lawyers, and doctors.”²² Nefarious practices, such as hanging oranges on Joshua trees and then selling desert lots as citrus groves, did not add to their popularity. The boomers hired hackmen, hotel employees, and waiters to seize prospects for them, and when someone showed interest in a certain lot, the promoter would quickly buy it and sell it at a marked-up price to his victim. In fact, things became rather rough during the boom. San Diego was a good example of how bad the situation could become, with gambling, desecration of the normally respected Sabbath with bars and gambling houses open. And “theft, murder, incendiarism, carousels, fights, highway robbery, and licentiousness gave to the passing show many of the characteristics of the frontier camp.”²³

But the long-term results of the boom were good. Irrigation facilities were expanded, education was encouraged. Occidental and Pomona colleges were products of the boom. Although the people who were most seriously hurt were those California residents who could not believe the boom was happening when it burst upon them, smugly ignored it during its development, then, finally convinced that they were being left out of a major trend, invested unwisely just before the collapse, the number of casualties was not that great. Those who were hurt were hurt badly, but the economy, although it dropped precipitously in the spring of 1888, never fell to the levels it had occupied before the boom. Pasadena probably suffered more than most communities because of the intensity of the flurry that had occurred there. But with regard to Los Angeles, Netz argued:

...the great real estate boom of 1887 was not built wholly on air. It was run to mania to be sure. It must be remembered that the frontier town of 1885, with its business at the Temple Block, was transformed into a flourishing city in 1889. Our real estate boomers went a little bit faster than the country, that was all...Our intrinsic resources have sustained us through the reaction which followed the wildest real estate excitement which ever attended the building of any American city.²⁴

The boom was significant, not only for its color, picturesque-

ness, and uproarious enthusiasm, but also because it wiped out forever the last traces of the Spanish-Mexican pastoral economy which had characterized California history since 1769. The gold rush made northern California a real part of the United States; the boom of the '80s did precisely that for the south. Where once the cattle of the plain had grazed in silence over rich areas, now the American citizen built his trolley lines, founded his banks, and irrigated his orange groves. The boom was the final step in making California truly a part of the United States.

NOTES

¹Joseph Netz, "The Great Los Angeles Real Estate Boom of 1887," *Annual Publications Historical Society of Southern California*, X, Pts. 1-2 (1915-1916): 56.

²Theodore S. Van Dyke, *Millionaires of a Day: An Inside History of the Great Southern "Boom"* (New York: Howard and Hulbert, 1890), pp. 131ff.

³Charles Dudley Warner, "The Golden Hesperides," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXI (January 1888): 48-50.

⁴Charles Nordhoff, *California: for Health, Pleasure, and Residence* (New York: Harpers, 1873), p. 139.

⁵William Henry Bishop, *Old Mexico and Her Lost Provinces* (New York: Harpers, 1883), p. 435.

⁶Theodore S. Van Dyke, *Southern California* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1886), p. 151.

⁷Warner, "The Golden Hesperides," p. 49.

⁸Nordhoff, *California*, p. 18.

⁹Benjamin Truman, *Semi-Tropical California* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Co., 1874), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰Benjamin F. Taylor, *Between the Gates* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs & Co., 1878), p. 261.

¹¹Warner, "The Golden Hesperides," p. 48.

¹²*Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1887.

¹³*Ibid.*, December 19, 1886.

¹⁴*Los Angeles Tribune*, May 29, 1887.

¹⁵James M. Guinn, *Historical and Biographical Record of Southern California* (Chicago: Chapman Publishing Co., 1902), pp. 184ff.

¹⁶*San Diego Union*, October 1, 1887.

¹⁷*San Diego Free Press*, February 2, 1887.

¹⁸*Los Angeles Tribune*, April 24, 1887.

¹⁹Guinn, *Southern California*, p. 141.

²⁰*Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1887.

²¹Guinn, *Southern California*, p. 260.

²²Glenn C. Quiett, *They Built the West* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), p. 282.

²³William E. Smythe, *History of San Diego* (San Diego: History Co., 1907), pp. 11, 428.

²⁴Netz, "The Great Los Angeles Real Estate Boom," p. 68.